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ABSTRACT

The relevance of Machiavellian theories of political leadership to school administration is examined in this paper, with a focus on the superintendent/school board relationship. As the first modern political theorist, Machiavelli used empirical observation and generalization to understand that perceptions are more real in their consequences than reality itself. Themes include security over virtue and the usefulness of being feared. He argued that politics is about the power and security of the state. From this viewpoint, the school superintendent is a political leader who addresses the political realities of the job. In a time of educational controversy, Machiavellian thought may prove to be interesting reading material for school superinttendents. (LMI)

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Machiavelli's Political Realism: Its Implications for Today's Superintendent-School Board Interactions

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Machiavelli is the master of realpolitik calculation; he believes that politics is necessarily concerned with power and that political leadership is essential to a safe and secure state. His message is a simple one: we must guard against the world because people are rotten, wicked, self interested, and fickle. The political leader deals with the "is" not the ideal. The real world is all we have; we must realize this or we shall fail in our mission.

This realistic approach stands in sharp contrast to the idealism preached by Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed in a just polity--that men and women could be educated to be virtuous. Plato excluded the masses from his utopia; he wanted a few select philosopher-kings to rule in the interest of the total citizenry. Aristotle preferred governance by the middle class, why? The middle class has property, a solid family life, and a stake in the political system. Aristotle was looking for moderation, for the golden mean, for balance between the extremes of the right and the left. Plato and Aristotle had dominated political thought until Machiavelli wrote his famous work, The Prince and the Discourses.

Books on school administration have generally followed the quasi-utopian school of political theory. (Guthrie and Reed, 1986) School board-superintendent relationships are described as they should be not how they sometimes turn out. Simple nostrums like the board makes policy and the superintendent implements policy are touted as the reality. These textbooks tend to stress

the technical aspects of administering schools rather than discussing strategies for political leadership. In fact, for years, it was assumed that the schools were not engaged in politics. As a result, many young school superintendents were ill equipped to face the daily challenges which frequently engulfed them.

Machiavelli's theories are as applicable today as they were 500 years ago. Let us examine the wisdom of his most quoted statement from The Prince:

> It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.

School administration is rife with examples supporting this theme. For example, the LaCrosse, Wisconsin board of education recently approved a policy recommendation from its superintendent of schools to redistribute lower socio-economic students among the various elementary schools in the district through boundary changes. This involved busing for some students. The issue became a fire storm receiving national media attention. Petitions for recalling the board have been filed and efforts are being made to fire the superintendent and his two closest administrative colleagues.

Why did Machiavelli think a planned change of this magnitude was dangerous? Machiavelli stated that "the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who

have the laws in their favor; and partly from the incredulity of mankind who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it. Thus it arises that on every opportunity for attacking the reformer, his opponents do so with the zeal of partisans, the others only defend him half-heartedly, so that between them he runs great danger."

Machiavelli clearly has a lot of advice to offer the modern day educational administrator. Machiavelli lived five centuries ago--much of his writing seems to be concerned with obsolete subjects--artillery vs. town walls--or arcane personages--the prince, the conspirator, the Roman consul. Indeed, one frequently repeated piece of advice is to never violate the wives of your subjects; today's superintendent of schools does not need to hear from Machiavelli considering the bitter experiences of Bill Clinton and Clarence Thomas. Less dramatic instances occur constantly. One example suffices. A candidate for the superintendency of Racine, Wisconsin arrived in town to find a newspaper headline declaring that he was involved in a paternity suit. End of candidacy.

Machiavelli's research method may be described as empirical observation and generalization. First he examines historical incidents and/or present situations, then he derives general principles, then he formulates advice based upon these principles. Even though his data seem esoteric (Italian dukes and princes, Macedonian kings, Carthaginian generals) his method relies on real examples rather than the philosophical questions

favored by Plato. His approach was considered extremely innovative during his time, as the formulation of "ideals" was considered more appropriate than an examination of reality.

Hopefully, modern school administrators have been educated in a quite different way from Machiavelli and his contemporaries--the emphasis currently on research and the scientific method should not have gone to waste completely. Empirical observation and hypothesis-testing should be a routine part of their vocabulary and of their approach to leadership issues.

That Machiavelli is au courant in his advice is readily apparent if one takes a look at his emphasis on the value of impression and illusion. We are inundated in our daily lives by these false messages which we may unconsciously absorb without realizing it (i.e., Willie Horton, read my lips) Machiavelli states:

> He who desires or attempts to reform the government of a state, and wishes to have it accepted and capable of maintaining itself to the satisfaction of everybody, must at least retain the semblance of the old forms; so that it may seem to the people that there has been no change in the institutions, even though they are in fact entirely different from the old ones. For the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often even more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are.

In other words, the school superintendent should <u>seem</u> to have good qualities, to appear to be kind. His or her own human values need not be revealed. Human nature is so unreliable that it deserves deception. Since we carry symbolic messages even when unplanned, it behooves us to plan symbolic actions so as to

have more control over their effects. In sum, the end justifies the means. If to our advantage, we may advocate participatory management because it is faddish to use phrases like "empowering teachers" in our speeches to our constituency. We create the illusion that we are democratic administrators in order to retain political power.

Let us return to the LaCrosse example. The citizens that stepped forward to oust the school board and the three top administrators claimed that the real issue wasn't the recently adopted and controversial elementary school boundaries. They stated that they were brought together not by busing but by fiscal irresponsibility.

These citizens know the value of simulated images that appear more real than reality. We have grown accustomed in the post modern world to spectacles and images to inform us. Isn't Madonna more real than the real thing? Words become commodities so that a change designed to focus on giving each child a better chance to succeed is labeled cynically by its critics as a waste of taxpayer's money. (One could argue whether the role of the school is to change society but that is a different matter). Machiavelli understood that perceptions are more real in their consequences than reality itself.

Consider the simple act of the superintendent of schools treating his or her secretary as a friend and colleague. What is important is who knows about the friendship. If it is not known and thus in evidence as a symbol of the superintendent's "caring

for the staff," it is wasted effort in the symbolic sense though other benefits may accrue (i.e. political ally, confidant, true friend).

Chapter 15 of The Prince ushers in the essence of Machiavelli's thought. He argues that the prince (for our purposes we would substitute the superintendent of schools) must learn how not to be good. Virtue, according to Machiavelli, has nothing to do with power. In fact, virtue may lead to ruin, while vice leads to security.

Such harsh doctrine might not be necessary if people were good as Plato would have us believe. The unreliability of human nature dictates this behavior. Machiavelli states that there is a big difference between how we actually live and how we should, the famous fact-value dichotomy. We must study the real not the ideal or we lose power. We should be concerned with security and well being. Politics is not about the quest for moral virtue. You have to be realistic about the way people are.

The superintendent who follows Machiavelli would not hesitate to practice deception if necessary. The Machiavellian mandate is to appear to be good if at all possible. A Machiavellian superintendent of schools might release standardized test results and proclaim that the students in the school system scored above the national norm. The ever truthful superintendent might release the same data but point out that national norms for his or her school system are relatively meaningless since the school population is better advantaged and

should score higher. Machiavelli is saying that the excessively moral superintendent might lead the school system to ruin if he or she functioned primarily out of a value framework. A little obfuscation or a reliance on facts alone should lead to a more secure school system.

In Chapter 17 of The Prince Machiavelli raises the question of whether it is better to be loved or feared. He suggests that all things being equal it would be better to be good but since people have their limitations it is better to be feared. Machiavelli comments on his own words:

> It may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful, voluble, dissemblers, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain; as long as you benefit them, they are entirely yours; they offer you their blood, their goods, their life, and their children . . . when the necessity is remote; but when it approaches, they revolt.

Machiavelli does not believe in random violence; violence used judiciously is best. Moreover, these injuries should be done all at once. The advice is to calculate the costs and the benefits, not might is right, but craftiness is key. Fear involves dread of punishment and people are hesitant to resist because of possible consequences; on the other hand, people see the loving and tenderhearted leader as weak and less dangerous.

Surgical violence is Machiavelli's recommendation. You attack one individual or one group at a time. Violence is used deftly, much like in the Persian Gulf war which freed Kuwait while perhaps as many as 200,000 lives were lost. The surgical strike involved massive destruction of Iraq's infrastructure--its

electric power grids, water pumping and purification plants, sewage systems, transportation and communication links. Very little has been said about this massive destruction since direct attacks on civilian targets were ruled out.

It is easy to adapt this bit of advice to school administration. If a new superintendent enters a school system it is better to make severe changes like the firing or reallocation of personnel quickly and early on in one's tenure while bestowing largesse gradually so the taste lasts longer. Do not keep doing negative things piecemeal, do them all at once.

Machiavelli also believes that the political leader must know how to use the character of beasts. It is important not to pick any animal; the lion and the fox are the proper choices. For the lion is powerful and is capable of defeating wolves; at the same time, the fox is agile and can avoid traps better than the lion.

Since men and women are innately wicked and keep no faith with you, the political leader needs to be a great liar and hypocrite when necessary. It is unwise to keep your word like the lion if it goes against your interest. The leader should appear to be like the lion while concealing carefully any crafty intentions in the guise of a fox.

Finally, Machiavelli's treatment of religion emphasizes the amoral nature of his decision-making. Machiavelli recommends religion quite strongly in several chapters of the Discourses. However, this recommendation does not come from the inherent

virtues of religion or the promise of eternal life for its followers. Again, Machiavelli views the advantages and disadvantages of religion through a rational lens. Religion is recommended because it makes governing easier. Therefore, the leader of a state in which religion is practiced will be better able to retain power. Likewise, religion is advantageous to Machiavelli because it can be used against the masses in order to get them to perform an action they would not otherwise perform. For example, religious fervor is cited as helpful when leading soldiers into battle especially when the enemy is perceived as mightier. Religion then is a tool, just as fear and illusion are tools. Each should be used when the consequences of that use serve the overall goal.

The school superintendent attracted to Machiavelli's reasoning might decide to join a mainline church because it would help to legitimize his public morality. It does not matter whether he is "religious" or not. It makes governing easier, particularly in a value laden enterprise like education.

Conclusion

To read Machiavelli and to expect everything to have equal value is to be misled. In the twentieth century there are those who would dismiss the whole argument because of a few or even the majority of its specific points, the latter is a shortsighted view.

It needs to be emphasized that Machiavelli was the first political theorist to break from the classical Greek idealist

point of view. Machiavelli saw the world as it is, not as it ought to be; he was an empiricist who observed and described what he saw. Machiavelli has been depicted as an evil man but that simple view has been soundly repudiated by the Pulitzer prize winning book of Sebastian de Grazia (1989). Machiavelli was a realist; politics to him was about power and security. By security he meant the state not the individual. To read Machiavelli carefully is to learn how his political theory is relevant in today's world.

Superintendents of schools are viewed by some researchers as decision makers, as individuals who control boards of education by their information, their professional expertise, and their political guile (Kerr, 1964; Ziegler, Kehoe, Reisman, 1985; Ziegler, Jennings & Peak, 1974). Others point out that the board-superintendency relationship is problematical and dependent upon the nature of the community, the personality of the superintendent, the type of board of education and the extent of noise in the system. (McCarty and Ramsey, 1971).

Both of these approaches view the superintendent of schools as a political leader primarily. Who would deny that Machiavelli has more to say to the working school superintendent than the idealistic prescriptions that appear in typical educational administration manuals? The subtleties of Machiavelli's argument address the political realities that superintendents face. The intent of Machiavelli is to sensitize the political leader and to

offer practical advice based on historical examples of figures who sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed.

Educational administration is a most difficult enterprise because the purpose of education is a contested notion; sensible people argue heatedly about what good education really is. That we are not sure becomes self-evident by today's controversies over what should be done to improve education.

Any superintendent of schools working in such a turbulent environment might find Machiavelli an interesting read. It is well to keep in mind that he is the first modern political theorist, that he was trying to write something useful to practitioners, and that he is revered as the father of realpolitik, coin of the realm to the modern school superintendent.

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